Jesse Mixson

Ms. Krafft

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Response Paper, *Beloved*

In the world of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, memories are not only tangible, they’re alive. These places and entities able to interact with and influence the cast, and indeed, they are treated as characters in and of themselves. The narration gives emotion – spite – to the family house in the opening line and emotion gives them power and agency. Other, human, characters openly acknowledge these location-figures, highlighting their validity, but the text also shows that they will make their presence known with or without this respect. This is most obvious with Beloved herself, who takes on a human (or human-like) role to re-embed herself into the house and family, but also with the actual building of 124, as well other locations throughout the novel.

An important moment early in the novel is when Sethe tells Denver about the concept of tangible “rememory.” She, too, anthropomorphizes places, in this case Sweet Home, by warning “...even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you.” (44). Sethe is not a woman who indulges in flights of fancy (she even avoids plans in general after the suffering they’ve caused her), and this erases any doubts as to what is the cause of the incorporeal entities present throughout the novel. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the memory, and the stronger the place and spirit.

Even before Beloved takes on her human guise, Denver treats the baby ghost and even 124 as more than just a ghost or building. The narration even says as much when the girl is returning from her hideaway in the boxwood bushes, approaching the house and “regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure.” (35). She goes on to say 124 is like a dependent relative, anthropomorphizing it and ascribing all manner of behavior and feelings to it, from distress to pride, weeping and fits.

Beloved agrees with the connection of the home and relatives. In fact, she claims 124 as herself, declaring “I’m like this,” and curled up in the darkness of the cold room, she continues on to say the darkness is her face (146). And it is once Beloved appears in chapter five, the power emotion and memory shines through not just in her, but in how she is able to draw it out of other characters, especially Sethe. Beloved draws out stories of Sethe, like those of her mother and her diamond earrings – things she hid and repressed, but like she told Denver, “nothing ever dies,” and certainly not a powerful memory.

And there appears to be a two-way exchange in that places become people and people become places. The latter is clear with Beloved, but it also shown in the language of the narration, such as when Sethe is crawling to the lean-to with Amy Denver: she thinks “…maybe she wasn’t, after all, just a crawling graveyard…” (42). Even the metaphors call back to this relationship.

Throughout the entire novel, there are examples of how emotionally charged memories take on a literal life of their own. Within the first few pages, Baby Suggs announces, “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief.” (6). If emotions grant power to memories, than it’s no wonder Sethe talks about bumping into rememories: the sheer weight of the emotions produced by an entire people’s trauma means they are littered throughout the country. And it is no wonder something so deeply personal – the death of a baby, the free baby of a fearful former-slave mother – would be enough to fill 124 up to the top.